

North Ayrshire Council Annual Complaint Report 2023 to 2024

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Introduction

North Ayrshire Council always seeks to deliver the best services possible to its customers and residents, but it is recognised that dissatisfaction will sometimes occur. When it does, we want to know what went wrong, why it went wrong and what we can do to make things right.

The council recognises that valuable lessons can be learnt from complaints which are defined as being expressions of dissatisfaction from members of the public about actions, or lack of actions, or about the standard of service provided by or on behalf of the council.

The council's complaint handling procedure (CHP) has two stages for handling complaints from the public.

Stage One complaints (also known as Frontline Resolution) are straightforward, non-complex complaints the council can resolve at the initial point of contact or as close to the point of service delivery as possible. The council has up to five working days to resolve these.

Stage Two complaints (also known as Investigations) are complaints the council is typically unable to resolve at Stage One and needs more time to carry out further investigation. This may be because the nature of the complaint is complex, serious or high risk. The council has up to 20 working days to resolve these.

This report details the council's complaint handling performance covering financial year 2023 to 2024 (1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024). Performance is measured via several Scottish Public Services Ombudsman indicators (some of which have national targets) and complaint data relating to previous years has been included in certain sections to allow comparisons to be made.

Reporting complaints is a statutory requirement and is monitored by Audit Scotland.

This report has been reviewed for accessibility prior to publication.

1. Volume of complaints closed

The council received 1,948 complaints during 2023 and closed 2,039.

The table below provides a breakdown of the closed complaints per Directorate.

Directorate	Volume
Chief Executive's	100
Communities & Housing	421
Education	182
Health & Social Care	113
Place	1,212
Multi-Service	11

The following tables highlight complaint volumes per Directorate under each Stage.

Chief Executive's

Team	Stage One	Stage Two
Chief Executive Service	1	0
Customer Services	79	6
Finance	2	1
IT	4	0
Legal Services	5	2
Total	91	9

Communities & Housing

Team	Stage One	Stage Two
Building Services	261	11
Community Facilities	2	1
Community Learning & Development	1	0
Housing	100	12
Information & Culture	8	2
Planning	4	3
Protective Services	14	2
Total	390	31

Education

Team	Stage One	Stage Two
Education (HQ)	18	7
Education (Schools)	102	43
Facilities Management	12	0
Total	132	50

Health & Social Care

Team	Stage One	Stage Two
Children, Families & Criminal Justice	27	6
Finance & Transformation	4	0
Health & Community Care	46	12
Mental Health	3	7
Support Services	6	2
Total	86	27

Place

Team	Stage One	Stage Two
Community Wealth Building	0	1
Property Management	103	9
Regeneration	2	1
Roads	58	2
Streetscene	103	2
Sustainability	1	2
Waste Services	921	7
Total	1,188	24

Multi-Service

Team	Stage One	Stage Two
Complaints involving more than one Service	1	10
Total	1	10

Although there is no target for the volume of complaints handled under each Stage, the council seeks to maximise closure at Stage One wherever possible and 93% were handled at this Stage during the period.

Some Services handled all their complaints at Stage One.

Some Services that received higher complaint volumes than other Services handled very few complaints at Stage Two, notably Building Services, Housing, Streetscene and Waste Services due to the nature of the complaints received.

Whilst 46% of all complaints received during the year related to Waste Services (the majority being missed bin collections or assisted pullouts), the Service empties over 102,000 household waste bins each week. As this equates to approximately 4.9 million collections over the year, only 0.02% of all bins collected resulted in complaints being received. Good progress continues to be made in the service with a 31% reduction in complaints compared to the previous year and a 40% reduction when comparing complaints from 2021. Ongoing challenges remain in the service such as absence levels and these are being handled and managed appropriately.

Year on Year comparison

The table below shows a comparison of the volume of complaints received over the last three years:

Year	Volume of complaints
2021	2,827
2022	2,629
2023	1,948

A 26% drop in complaints received when comparing 2023 with the previous year. The decrease could be partly attributable to the complaint page in the council's website being

enhanced, which now includes more information what the council does not deem a complaint and offers appropriate routes to raise such matters.

2. Volume of complaints closed on time at both Stages

Stage	Percentage closed on time	Target
Stage One	87%	80% and above
Stage Two	88%	85% and above

The volume closed on time in the table above includes extended complaints that met their new due dates.

3. Volume of complaints not closed on time per Directorate

This section provides details of complaints not closed on time under each Stage and includes extended complaints that did not meet their new timescales.

Stage One

Chief Executive's

Department	Volume
Customer Services	1
Finance	1
Legal Services	1

These complaints breached timescale because a complaint handler was unable to contact a complainant to discuss their complaint, a complaint was passed to a complaint handler who was unavailable due to sickness absence and operational pressures. Extensions could have been considered for two of these complaints given they were closed within the extra five working day extension allowance.

Communities & Housing

Department	Volume
Building Services	17
Housing	9
Protective Services	1

Multiple reasons were noted as to why these complaints did not meet timescale, including delays in complaints being directed to the correct Services, awaiting information to progress complaints and employee availability. Extensions could have been considered for the vast majority of these given they were closed within the extra five working day extension allowance.

Education

Department	Volume
Education (HQ)	2
Education (Schools)	8

Various reasons were provided as to why these complaints did not meet timescale, with the main reason being complainants not being available to assist with investigations.

Health & Social Care

Department	Volume
Children & Families	1
Health & Community Care	5
Mental Health	1
Support Services	1

There were various reasons these complaints did not meet timescale, including complaint handlers, employees and/or complainants not being available to progress investigations.

Place

Department	Volume
Property Management	3
Roads	3
Streetscene	19

Department	Volume
Sustainability	1
Waste Services	173

Multiple reasons were given for complaints not closed on time, including complaint handlers and complainants being unavailable to progress complaints, complainants/third parties being unavailable to assist with investigations and resourcing issues (including employee availability).

Of the 199 Place complaints not closed on time, 66% could have been considered for extension as they were closed within the extra five working day extension allowance.

Regarding Waste Services complaints, see additional commentary in next section.

Stage Two

Chief Executive's

Department	Volume
Legal Services	1

This complaint breached timescale because the complainant requested a change in complaint handler. This complaint should have been considered for timescale extension.

Communities & Housing

Department	Volume
Building Services	2
Housing	2
Planning	1
Protective Services	1

These complaints breached timescale due to various reasons, with the main reasons being employee availability and operational pressures. All six complaints could have been considered for timescale extensions.

Education

Department	Volume
Education (HQ)	1
Education (Schools)	9

Several complaints breached timescale due to a change in senior manager and a small number breached as the complainants were unavailable. Some of these could have had their timescales extended.

Health & Social Care

Department	Volume
Mental Health	1

This complaint breached timescale as additional checks were required at response approval stage.

4. Key complaint topics

Key topics for upheld and partially upheld complaints for services are listed below. Services will not be listed if there were low complaint volumes that did not allow meaningful analysis.

Chief Executive's

Service	Key complaint topic
Customer Services	Council tax issues
Customer Services	Employee actions (alleged or perceived)

Education

Service	Key complaint topic
Education (HQ & schools)	Sensitive issues relating to teachers and/or pupils
Education (HQ & schools)	Service delivery/provision
Education (HQ & schools)	Employee actions (alleged or perceived)

Health & Social Care

Service	Key complaint topic
All HSCP Services	Service delivery/provision
All HSCP Services	Employee actions (alleged or perceived)

Place

Service	Key complaint topic
Building Services	Follow up appointments
Building Services	Quality of work issues
Housing	Estate management
Property Management and Investment	Gas central heating (maintenance and more)
Property Management and Investment	Planned works
Streetscene	Tree/grass/verge/hedge cutting issues

Service	Key complaint topic
Streetscene	Employee actions (alleged or perceived)
Waste Services	Employee actions (alleged or perceived)
Waste Services	Issues with new bin deliveries
Waste Services	Missed waste bin/assisted collections (all colours)
Waste Services	Recycle scheme issues (shortage of food waste bags and more)

'Employee actions (alleged or perceived)' appears as a key topic for some services, but the definition is broad and has been used where complainants either alleged or perceived employee actions or behaviour to be unacceptable. Whilst investigations may determine this is not always the case, where unacceptable behaviour was identified by Services appropriate action will have been taken to address.

5. Average time in working days for a full response

The average time in working days to close complaints under both Stages during the year is noted below. Values for previous years have been included to allow comparisons to be made. Any complaints that had their timescales extended have been excluded from the calculations.

Stage	Year	Average number of working days to close	Target
One	2021	4.2	Five working days or less
One	2022	4.2	Five working days or less
One	2023	3.8	Five working days or less
Two	2021	15.4	20 working days or less
Two	2022	14.9	20 working days or less
Two	2023	16.8	20 working days or less

The average time to close complaints under both Stages has consistently exceeded target.

The tables below detail Services that did not meet the average time in working days for a response under either Stage. Services that met the target are not listed and any complaints that had their timescales extended have been excluded from the calculations.

Chief Executive's

Stage One	Average number of working days to close	Target
Finance	13	Five workings days or less

One Finance complaint was closed on working day 21, resulting in the five working day average target not being met for the Service.

Communities & Housing

Stage Two	Average number of working days to close	Target
Planning	23	20 workings days or less
Protective Services	45	20 workings days or less

One Planning complaint was closed on working day 47 due to employee unavailability and one Protective Services complaint was closed on working day 45 due to the complexity of the issues raised. These complaints could have been considered for timescale extension.

Education

Stage Two	Average number of working days to close	Target
Education (Schools)	21	20 workings days or less

A small number of complaints were closed out with the 20 working days timescale, resulting in the target not being met. Some of these complaints could have had their timescales extended.

Health & Social Care

Stage One	Average number of working days to close	Target
Mental Health	9.5	Five workings days or less

A Mental Health Stage One complaint was closed on working day 15, resulting in the target not being met.

6. Extended complaints

103 complaints had their timescales extended during the year (81 at Stage One and 22 at Stage Two). The complaints related to various Services across all Directorates.

There were various reasons for extending, including complainants, third parties and employees being unavailable to assist or support with investigations and/or letter approvals, obtaining additional information to support investigations and resourcing/operational issues. Of the 103 complaints that had their timescales extended, 80% were closed within their new due dates.

7. Complaint Outcomes

Up to 31 March 2021, a complaint that meets our complaint criteria could be upheld, partially upheld or not upheld. From 1 April 2021, a fourth outcome became available to use called 'Resolved'. Resolved complaints are where the council has taken action to address the problem or issue without making a decision on whether there were any failings (this would happen where we agree a solution with the complainant at the outset without needing to actually investigate the complaint).

The charts below detail the number of complaints upheld, partially upheld, not upheld or resolved under both Stages.

Stage One

Outcome	Percentage
Closed as Resolved	39%
Closed as Upheld	32%
Closed as Partially Upheld	12%
Closed as Not Upheld	17%

Of all complaints upheld and partially upheld at Stage One, just over half related to Waste Services and in particular bin collections.

55% of all Resolved complaints also related to Waste Services (again mainly missed bin collections), indicating these complainants simply wanted their bins collected without the need for investigation.

Complaints that were not upheld related to policies, regulations or were complaints that were poor quality/unfounded.

Stage Two

Outcome	Percentage
Closed as Resolved	4%
Closed as Upheld	13%
Closed as Partially Upheld	39%
Closed as Not Upheld	44%

All Stage Two complaints that were upheld or partially upheld were split across multiple Services across all Directorates.

Of the 44% of complaints not upheld, those decisions were reached for various reasons, including the application of polices and regulations and complaints that were unsubstantiated.

Note - Partially Upheld complaints are complaints that contain more than one complaint element and at least one of them is upheld.

The tables below detail the outcomes at each stage covering the last three years:

Stage One complaints

Year	Resolved	Upheld	Partially Upheld	Not Upheld
2021 to 2022	47%	30%	8%	15%
2022 to 2023	47%	30%	9%	14%
2023 to 2024	39%	32%	12%	17%

Stage Two complaints

Year	Resolved	Upheld	Partially Upheld	Not Upheld
2021 to 2022	2%	10%	33%	55%
2022 to 2023	3%	11%	40%	46%
2023 to 2024	4%	13%	39%	44%

In terms of the tables above:

Resolved complaints are complaints where the council has taken action to address a problem/issue without making a decision on whether there were any failings. This would happen where the council agree a solution with the complainant at the outset without any need to actually investigate the complaint

Upheld complaints are complaints where something has gone wrong/not happened and the council needs to take steps to address

Partially Upheld complaints are complaints that have multiple complaint elements, some of which are upheld, and the rest are not

Not Upheld complaints are complaints that have not been upheld for the following reasons:

- they related to policies or regulations
- upon investigation they proved to be unfounded/unsubstantiated
- they were in fact something else, for example service requests, queries, observations etc.

8. Improvements made as a result of complaints

Council services continually seek to identify improvements in service delivery and complaint information is analysed regularly to inform service improvements. Some improvements were implemented as a result of complaints received during the year and a selection is noted below.

What happened?	What we did
A complaint was received about grass cutting where litter was not being removed prior to cutting, which resulted in the litter being shredded and distributed across the park.	A refresher with the team responsible was arranged to ensure they are aware of their obligations in terms of litter removal and every effort will be made in the future to ensure litter is removed prior to any grass cutting activities.
A tenant encountered problems when radiators were incorrectly fitted and applied for a disturbance allowance payment for the inconvenience.	An apology was offered, and the matters addressed. Discussions then took place between the council and the contractor regarding the importance of replacing fixtures like for like as far as is practical and to rectify errors in a timeous manner. The processing of disturbance allowance payments is also being monitored more closely to minimise inconvenience to tenants.
A trader encountered problems when completing and returning a paper application to obtain a licence, including the incorrect fee being paid as the fees listed on the council's website were out of date.	An apology was offered for the inconvenience caused, the application processed, and licence granted. The council is in the process of placing the application form online to help speed up the process and the appropriate webpage has been updated with the correct fees.
A resident changed their bank details and experienced problems trying to change their Council Tax Direct Debit details to the new account.	An apology was offered to the complainant and the Direct Debt set up. The complainant asked if there could be an online option to amend the bank details for Council Tax rather than just an option to set up a new one each time. The service is currently considering this feedback.
A visitor to a Recycle Centre encountered problems in terms of	An apology was offered to the visitor for the problems encountered. The site has been upgraded to accommodate a larger volume of people wanting to recycle and a daily update was

What happened?	What we did
parking at the site due to excessive public use of the site that day.	placed on the internet regarding footfall at the site to reduce disruption.

9. Compliments

Over 230 compliments were recorded cross-council during the year and whilst they cannot all be highlighted in this report, a selection is noted below.

- “I just wanted to let you know how impressed I am with the **Recovery Development Worker**. Yesterday was the first time I spoke with him, and I was really struck by his high level of motivation, honesty and very obviously genuine desire to help and support people. He is like a breath of fresh air. We don’t give positive feedback often enough so wanted to let you know”
- “I’ve had an issue regarding arranging a special uplift and made a number of calls to your **Contact Centre**. Every time I called your operators were very helpful and considerate. They’ve to be commended because every time they answer a call they don’t know what that call is going to be about and have to rely on their considerable knowledge to try and answer or resolve it”
- “Thank you to **Waste Services** for following up on a complaint I made about my waste bins being missed. They have not been missed since so thank you!”
- A number of people have complimented the **Licensing Team** regarding their help and support regarding a short term let process for a number of hosts
- “I just want to highlight how fantastic the team at **Ardrossan Library** are. They go out of their way to show a welcoming, friendly environment. The time and effort they put in with kids (and adults alike) at the Monday toddler club is just brilliant. The kids look forward to it all week long”
- “To the staff at **Bartonholm Recycling Centre**, every time I go there I see them out helping folk get their discarded stuff away safely. And it’s always done with a smile. It must be a tough job in all weathers but they’re still so cheery and polite! Good on you, guys. You could deliver lessons in customer care!”
- “I recently wrote to you regarding the little garden area outside Largs station. I was absolutely delighted to see that the area has been cleared of weeds and litter and bedding plants have been planted. It all looks really pretty so thank you to **Streetscene** who carried out the planting. What a difference it makes”
- “I recently made a complaint to your **Property Management** department about some issues with scaffolding. Just wanted to say it got fixed immediately and you even fixed up the gate. Thank you to whoever came out to fix it. Absolute brilliant job”
- Exceptional feedback received for the **Universal Early Years service** which has resulted in an employee being invited to present at a European Conference on infant feeding.

- “My family and I like everything your **Refugee Team** does for us Ukrainians. Just want to say big thank you for everything. Incredible attitude towards us and everything is easy and simple”

10. Glossary

Terms & Explanations

Stage One

Stage One (also known as Frontline Resolution) aims to resolve straightforward customer complaints that require little or no investigation. Any employee may deal with complaints at this stage, and they can be resolved via any channel. The main principle is to seek resolution at the earliest opportunity and as close to the point of service delivery as possible.

Stage One complaints must be responded to within five working days unless an extension (a maximum of five additional working days) is requested and approved by a senior manager or above. The council should, however, always aim to resolve these types of complaints within five working days.

Stage Two

Not all complaints are suitable for Stage One and not all complaints will be satisfactorily resolved at that stage. Complaints therefore handled at Stage Two (also known as Investigations) typically require a detailed examination before the col can state its position. These complaints may already have been considered at Stage One, or they may have been identified from the outset as being complex, serious or high risk and needing immediate investigation.

Stage Two complaints must be responded to within 20 working days unless an extension is approved by senior manager in conjunction with the customer. Stage Two complaints require a written response, signed by a senior manager.

Complaint criteria

When an expression of dissatisfaction is received the council determines if the issue falls into one (or more) six complaint categories:

- A service the council should be providing is not being provided or is not available
- A request for a service was provided but not to an appropriate standard
- A request for service has not been answered or actioned within the agreed timescale
- A council employee was rude, unhelpful or unprofessional
- A council employee did not attend an appointment or call-out on a date/time agreed
- The complaint relates to a policy (internal or external)

If the issue being raised relates to one or more of the above, the matter is considered a complaint and will be recorded and handled as such. If not, the matter will be handled as a request for a service, observation or enquiry and actioned accordingly.